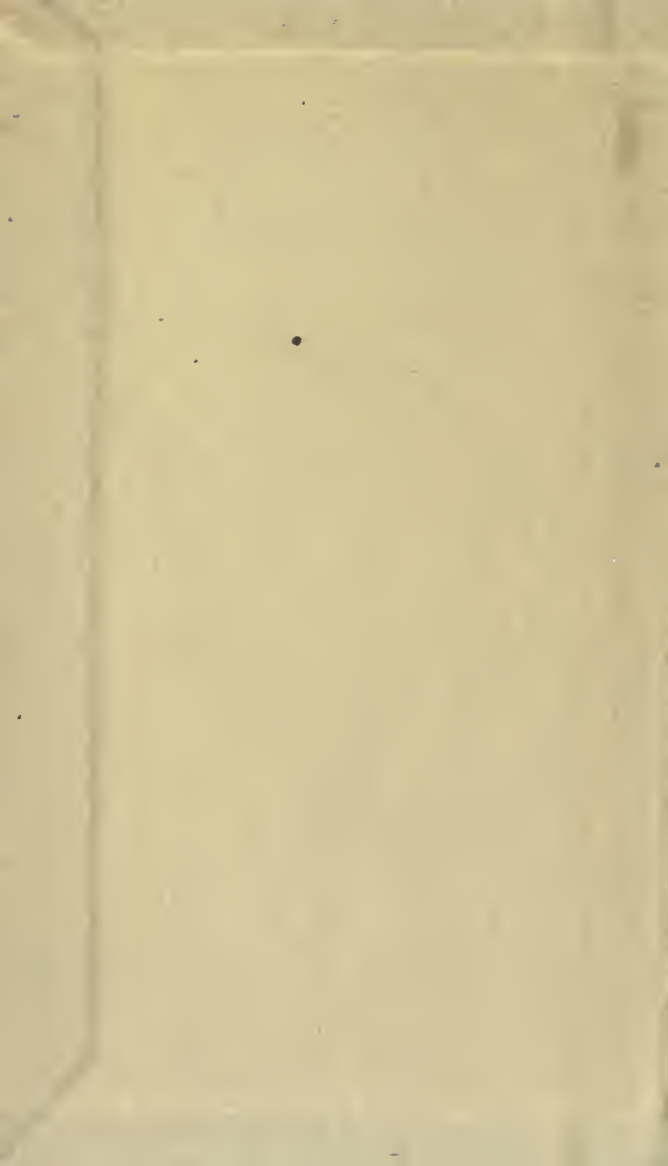


THE MESSAGE
OF FRANCIS
THOMPSON

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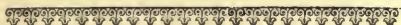
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FRANCIS THOMPSON



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THE MESSAGE OF FRANCIS THOMPSON

BY
A SISTER OF NOTRE DAME



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“**K** NOW you what it is to be a child?” says Francis Thompson. “It is to be something very different from the man of to-day. It is to have a spirit yet streaming from the waters of baptism; it is to believe in love, to believe in loveliness, to believe in belief; it is to be so little that the elves can reach to whisper in your ear; it is to turn pumpkins into coaches and mice into horses, lowness into loftiness and nothing into everything (for each child has its fairy godmother in its own soul); it is to live in a nutshell, and to count yourself the king of infinite space; it is

“ ‘ To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild-flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour. ’ ”

Now what is true of the child is no less true of the poet. A greater than Francis Thompson warned His hearers: "Unless you become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." And we may reverently add: "Unless you become as little children, unless you have their innocence, their faith, their hope, their love, you shall not enter into your full inheritance in the kingdom of song." The poet is essentially a seer. His mission is to discover the secrets of God and to proclaim them to men; to read the book of Nature and interpret it for us; to make us see with his eyes and hear with his ears. But how shall we, too, learn our lesson if he speak to us in an alien tongue? how feel with him if our eyes are blinded, our ears deafened by alien sights and sounds? "By the law of Nature," Thompson reminds us, "no man can admire, no man can understand that of which he has no echo in himself. Such an echo implies an experience kindred, if not equal, to that of the utterer." Now this experience may, of course, be gained directly and personally,

or indirectly, from the experience of others. Our sympathy with a poet depends, therefore, either on the fact that he sees what we see, hears what we hear, and feels what we feel, and that he expresses all this in a way which is at once luminous and beautiful; or that he excites and expands our imagination by showing us something we have never seen before, whether it be a new beauty in what is familiar, or something which has never before entered into our circle of experience. Sympathy and imagination are, then, the two wings by which we must follow the poet into the realms of song. He may, alas ! fly low, and keep us ever within the sights and sounds of earth, but if he be true to his high vocation, he will lead us into those upper regions where the sights we shall see and the sounds we shall hear are preludes to those things God has prepared for them that love Him. This is essentially true of the religious poet. I use the word "religious" rather than "mystical" because loose speaking is at once the cause and effect of loose thinking; and perhaps no words are

more abused in modern speech than the words "mystic" and "mystical." A man is sometimes called a mystic when he merely possesses the mental acumen to realise the existence of a mystical state. Or, again, the term is often applied to one who happens to be both enthusiastic and obscure, not living like the rest of the world, and taking dreams for realities. Still more common is the confusion caused by using the words "ascetic" and "mystic" as if they stood for one and the same thing. Asceticism is that temper of mind and feeling which considers the material world as valueless and meaningless except in its relation with higher things; it is that judgment of a man's higher self which sees clearly, and pronounces definitely, that the invisible world of the spirit, beyond our world of sense perception, is the real end and the true. Asceticism, therefore, means self-denial even in things that are lawful, for it is obvious that sense and appetite restrained are powerful aids to contemplation and the higher life. The more easily we sit loose to the things of this

world, the more easily we shall make those of the next our own. Thoreau, who tried to live, not indeed the supernatural life, but a higher form of the natural, as opposed to the artificial and conventional forms of life, has embodied this truth for us in the well-known dictum: "Reduce your common denominator." Yet it is not the mere doing without, the power to say "yes" or "no" to one's desires, the self-infliction of pain, which constitutes Christian asceticism. This were to mistake the means for the end. Just as the man who is going on a long day's march to a definite goal reduces his *impedimenta* to a minimum, just as the athlete restricts his diet in order to make himself more physically fit for the contest, so the Christian ascetic frees himself from all those material trammels which may hold his spirit back in its progress in the spiritual life.

But this *ascesis* or self-discipline is not mysticism. "In the strict sense of the word," says one who has studied the subject for forty years, "we give the name 'mystic' to supernatural states containing knowledge

of a kind that our own efforts and our own exertions could never succeed in producing." And he illustrates this definition by adding: " Ordinary prayer may be compared to the atmosphere that surrounds our globe. The birds move about in it at their will. Thanks to its aid they can rise above the earth, and they mount higher in proportion to the strength of their wing-beats. But this atmosphere has its limits. Above lie those vast expanses that stretch away to the stars and beyond. Try as they may they cannot penetrate thither even by redoubling their efforts. The eagle is as powerless as the rest. God alone can transport them into this region; were He to do so, they would lie passive in His hand, there would be no further need to use their wings. They would have to discard their former methods of operation and adopt new ones. This upper region where the wing no longer has any power is a figure of the mystic state. It resembles it also by its peace, its silence. Far from the turmoil of earth we enter into a space empty of all created things. God

alone dwells there." God alone can transport us there. This is sometimes the reward of the saintly on earth, those who have passed long years in self-denial and prayer. Yet it is essential to remember that not all saints are mystics: "The Spirit bloweth where it listeth," and for many—nay, for most—the Vision is withheld till after death.

Now the question arises: How far is the vision of the poet akin to that of the mystic? There are saints, such as St. Bernard, St. Francis, St. Teresa, and St. John of the Cross, who were at once poets and mystics, whose works reveal to us, according to our receptive power, those spiritual experiences with which God favoured them. And it may well be that the works of many poets, whose saintliness is hidden from human eyes, may, indeed, do so likewise. Such spiritual communications between God and the soul are, however, the secret of the King, which we must respect. But we may safely assume that religious poets in general are endowed with a genius and power of imagination akin, albeit most remotely, to the true mystical

vision of the saints, and because of this distant affinity we may accord them, at least, the courtesy title of mystical poet.

What is the mission of such a poet? He has to bring home to our earthly and finite minds supernatural and infinite truths; he has to translate for us the things of the spirit by the things of sense; he has to give the supernatural as many points of contact as possible with the natural; he has to enable us to apprehend by means of material symbols those spiritual realities which transcend human experience. All this he has to do for us and more. The more exquisitely sensitive he is to the impressions of the external world, the better he can bring home to us the beauty of the other world; but this same sensitiveness may often be the cause of his failure to do so. Lowell tells us that when the mind of the poet permeates and illuminates his senses, he is innocently sensuous; but that when, on the other hand, they muddy his mind, he is sensual. Here, then, is the task which falls to the mystical poet—to appeal to the soul through the

senses, leaving it strong in the conviction that

“ All earthly beauty hath one cause and proof—

To lead the pilgrim soul to beauty above,”

to remind us that here we have no lasting city, that earth is but the vestibule of heaven. Let us see how far Francis Thompson does this for his readers.

A poet's interpretation of life depends not only on his natural temperament and mentality, but also on his upbringing and environment; hence, if we would apprehend the full significance of Francis Thompson's work we must make a rapid survey of his life. It has been said—with what truth time must prove—that he will always be a poet of the few. If this be so, it is not wholly because of the difficult form of his poetry, but because he assumes a knowledge of certain spiritual principles and practices on the part of his readers which to many are alien, or even unintelligible.

The son of a Catholic doctor in Lancashire, Francis Thompson was sent in 1870, at the age of eleven, to Ushaw College, Durham, the Alma Mater of Lingard the historian, of Cardinal Wiseman, of Waterton, and of many who have become notable as zealous priests or able laymen. Here the boy remained for seven years with the intention of entering the sacred ministry; but watchful superiors recognised that the youth who shirked his appointed task to pursue the delights of literature, who was rarely, if ever, punctual at his daily duties, who was frequently absent in spirit even when present in body, was scarcely likely to become an ideal pastor of souls, though he might achieve success in some other walk of life. Yet the years at Ushaw were his spiritual seedtime, for it was there that he learned the lessons of uprightness and piety, never forgotten, even in his darkest hours; it was then, too, that he gained that knowledge of theology and of classical lore with which he enriched his poetry and, indeed, enriched English literature for all time.

His father now decided that he should study medicine at Owens College, Manchester, but after a period of neglect of work and evasion of duty Francis Thompson left home for London, aimless and practically penniless. Hard and bitter were his experiences. How he sold newspapers in the streets, how he held the heads of cab-horses at theatre doors, how he obtained employment in a boot-shop, and how, in spite of the kindness of the proprietor, he lost it, are facts familiar to all. Like De Quincey, whose *Confessions*, by the irony of fate, had been given to him by his mother, and like Coleridge, he fell a victim to the opium habit, and, but for what some would have called fortune and he would have called Providence, he might have become a mental and moral wreck. He tells us that in the latter half of February, 1887, "with a few shillings to give me breathing space, I began to decipher and put together the half-obliterated manuscript of 'Paganism.' I came simultaneously to my last page and my last half-penny, and went forth to drop the MS. in

the letter-box of *Merry England*." The busy editor, Mr. Meynell, after six months' delay, read the essay and, being more favourably impressed by it than by some of the poems, determined to seek out the author. But the letter was returned through the dead-letter office, and it was only by the device of printing a poem without the author's permission that the editor eventually got into touch with him. From thenceforth Francis Thompson found in Mr. Meynell a guide, philosopher, and friend—nay, more, a father, for the freedom of the hearth was accorded to the lonely stranger who but lately had known not what it was to have a home. Nursed back again to health, he retired for a time to the old-world village of Storrington in Sussex. *Poems* was published in 1893, *Sister Songs* in 1895, and *New Poems* in 1897, but his Muse forsook him, and he busied himself—as some hold more successfully—with prose. His contributions to *The Academy*, and later to *The Athenæum*, chiefly critical, were as sound in judgment as they were wide in sympathy. He died of consumption on

November 13, 1907, at the comparatively early age of forty-eight.

It were fitting, perhaps, that we should here dispose of one or two legends which have sprung up around Francis Thompson's name, the fiction of great misdeeds and the legend of a great unhappiness. Mrs. Meynell—and no one knew him more intimately—wrote shortly after his death: "During many years of friendship and almost daily companionship, it was evident to solicitous eyes that he was the most innocent of men. Of his alienation from ordinary life laudanum was the sole cause, and of laudanum early and long disease. Coleridge's fault was Thompson's, an evasion of the daily duty of man to man. But," she continues, "not one of Francis Thompson's poems, except, perhaps, *Dream-Tryst*—and this inferior to all others in his first volume—was written with the aid of opium. *Poems* and *Sister Songs* were his work during an interval of a few years after his cure in a hospital."

Again she writes: "Like the legend of

Francis Thompson's sins is that of his unhappiness no truer. I affirm of Francis Thompson that he had natural good spirits, and was more mirthful than many a man of cheerful, social, or even of humorous reputation. . . . What darkness and oppression of spirit the poet underwent was past and over some fifteen years before he died." This unimpeachable testimony must surely silence such hasty and ill-founded judgments as his who quite recently condemned Thompson's work as "unintelligible rubbish written under the influence of opium," and his who wrote: "Down those few terrible years he let himself go with the winds of fancy, and threw himself on the swelling wave of every passion." But it may be urged: What, then, are we to infer from his self-accusation, his frequent expressions of remorse? The answer is that those to whom has been vouchsafed a clearer perception of God view themselves—and others also—in a clearer light, and have an altogether different standard of values from the majority of men. The truly spiritual man

sees the gravity of the least fault committed against the Divine Majesty, and accuses himself in terms which lead the average man to think either that he is guilty of heinous sin, or that he is hypocritical. It is the old story of relative values, of consequent misinterpretations, and rash judgments.

In seeking to understand the work of Francis Thompson we must recognise from the outset that he deliberately imposed upon himself certain limitations in his art. He might have achieved greatness as a national poet. Mr. Lascelles Abercrombie considers that "few laureates can compare with Thompson for deliberate celebrations." Again, he might have outrivalled Keats or Swinburne in his wonderful power of imagery, his keenness of sense-perception, his love of sheer beauty. But, poet as he was, he was first and foremost a religious poet, and it is as a religious poet that we must finally judge him. I think it is Matthew Arnold who reminds us that just criticism considers what the author professed to do, and not what the critic

thinks he ought to have done. We do not quarrel with the artist who chooses Venice rather than Glasgow for the subject of his picture; neither shall we blame the poet who is so enamoured of heavenly beauty that he loses, or seems to lose, sight of much else. Mr. Harrison blames Thompson for singing so little of earthly passion. Thompson knew, perhaps better than his critics, that as the radii of a circle draw closer to each other as they draw near to their common centre, so human hearts draw nearer to each other the nearer they approach to their common centre—Christ; that he who sings of divine love must conceive highly and nobly of human love.

And—a still stricter limitation—he was essentially a Catholic poet. His readers may or may not agree with his principles and teaching, they may not be able to give him full sympathy of approbation, but if they are to give him strict justice as a poet, they must at least be able to extend to him a certain degree of sympathy of comprehension. Catholicity was the very fountain of his in-

spiration, Christ and His Blessed Mother were his intimate friends, his angel guardian was his dear familiar; when he calls himself "poor thief of song," it is because he has borrowed the very words of the noble liturgy of the Church; when he clothes Nature in imagery dignified and splendid, if to many unusual, it is because in the peaceful years at Ushaw mind, heart, and soul had drunk deep of the poetry of her ritual. Even the very obscurity of his diction is due in some cases, though by no means in all, to the inexperience of the reader rather than to the caprice of the poet. Such words as *monstrance*, *immaculacy*, *auxiliatrix* are not, perhaps, current coin of the realm, yet to Catholic ears their import is familiar and dear.

Another aspect of Francis Thompson's poems is his sense of nearness to God, his intimacy with spiritual things—an intimacy easily mistaken for irreverence. He himself asserted that the spirit of such poems as *The Making of Viola* was no mere medieval imitation, but the natural temper of his

Catholic training in a Catholic home. Quoting from Crashaw's *Nativity*—

“ Gloomy night embraced the place
Where that noble infant lay;
The Babe looked up, and showed His face:
In spite of darkness it was day.
It was Thy day, Sweet, and did rise
Not from the East but from Thine
eyes ”—

he remarks: “ Here is seen one note of Crashaw—the human and lover-like tenderness which informs his sacred poems, differentiating them from the conventional style of English sacred poetry with its solemn aloofness from celestial things.” How true this is of his own work ! And how utterly we shall fail to grasp its meaning if we do not recognise the spirit of his attitude towards God and the unseen world !

It is not my present purpose to touch upon the form of Francis Thompson's poems. Yet it is well to note that perhaps no poet of modern times has excited more adverse criticism. To Mr. Austin Harrison his

poetry is "sheer word-chaos"—nay, worse than this, but I will not offend your ears with the coarseness of the criticism in which irritation vents itself. Yet it is of the same poet's work that a writer in *The Times* says: "The whole outer form of things is flowering with the radiance of the inner beauty of the poet's vision." Mrs. Meynell, with the love of a mother, the vision of a poet, the sympathy of a fellow-artist, and the keenness of a critic, speaks of it as "resplendently coloured art with riches heaped too close." Mr. Arnold Bennett, no visionary, as his readers will allow, boldly asserts: "My belief is that Francis Thompson has a richer natural genius, a finer poetical equipment, than any poet save Shakespeare. Show me the divinest glory of Shelley and Keats, even of Tennyson, who wrote *The Lotus Eaters* and the songs in *The Princess*, and I think I can match them all out of this one book. I fear that in thus extolling Francis Thompson's work I am grossly outraging the canons of criticism. Well, please yourself what you think; but don't say in time to come I didn't

tell you." Writing in a similar strain, Mr. Garvin claims for Francis Thompson "the regal air, the prophetic ardours, the apocalyptic vision, the supreme utterance. To many," he adds, "this may seem the simple delirium of over-emphasis. The writer, nowise ashamed, signs for those others who range after Shakespeare's very sonnets the poetry of Francis Thompson." This is high praise, suspect to English ears, accustomed to the wariness of English—especially modern English—critics. But, when we have discounted much from what may appear the excess of praise or blame, the fact remains that the faults of which Francis Thompson must stand convicted are the defects of his qualities. He sins by the very wealth of his imagination, by the fecundity of his thought, by the lightning rapidity of his perception, by the height and depth of his spiritual intuition. Hence his riot of simile and metaphor, his eccentric word-coining; hence his apparent lack of sequence; hence his irritating ellipses, his digressions; hence his so-called obscurity, his narrow outlook.

We may or may not admit these charges, but we must, if we have any true poetic feeling, realise that here is no mere versifier, no mere singer of a day, but one who rightly claims high rank in the world of song.

Mr. G. K. Chesterton says of the Victorian critics: "None of them were able even to understand Francis Thompson—his sky-scraping humility, his mountains of mystical detail, his occasional and unashamed weakness, his sudden and sacred blasphemies. Perhaps the shortest definition of the Victorian age is that he stood outside it." To what age then shall we assign him? We must, I think, undoubtedly hark back to the seventeenth century, to the age that produced such men as Crashaw, Cowley, Herbert, Donne, Vaughan, Traherne, and Marvell. And, if the conjunction of all these names raises a question in your minds, note that, though they are not all mystical poets in the commonly accepted sense of the term, yet there is in them all that exaltation of the senses, that power of luminous vision, of passionate and mysterious brooding, which

characterise the poetry, both religious and secular, of the seventeenth century, and which were so conspicuous by their absence in the century that followed it. True, the nineteenth century ushered in a Blake, a Wordsworth, and a Coleridge, in whose works we seem to catch an echo of the far-off seventeenth-century mysticism; true, too, that in Shelley, in Tennyson, in Browning, perhaps, and in the two Rossettis we have the promise of another Spring. But Patmore and Francis Thompson seem to stand definitely apart from these, inasmuch as the general atmosphere of their work is spiritual and mystical, whereas it is only at intervals that we breathe this rarer air in the work of their contemporaries.

But if Francis Thompson was not of the nineteenth century, he at least lived in it; it acted and reacted upon him, it thrust its problems before his eyes, it whispered to him things both good and evil, it drew him by its manifold attractions, it repelled him by its emptiness and its delusions; it drove him finally to the shelter of the Everlasting

Arms, where he learned, as a child from his father, the solution of that great puzzle—the meaning of life.

“ Without love,” wrote Francis Thompson, “ no poetry can be beautiful, for all beautiful poetry comes from the heart.” And again: “ The most beautiful thing in love-poetry is love.” Of this love Francis Thompson conceives highly and nobly. If it be true—and few will dispute it—that the moral greatness of a nation may be estimated by its attitude towards women, it is equally true that we may apply the same test to the work of a love-poet; his ideal of womanhood will be the determining factor in the quality of his poetry. Now, Francis Thompson’s ideal of womanhood was none other than She whom Wordsworth acclaimed:

“ Woman, above all other women glorified,
Our tainted nature’s solitary boast ”;

She of whom Francis Thompson says:

“ This, could I paint my inmost sight,
This were our Lady of the Night.

She bears on her front's lucency
The starlight of her purity;
For as the white rays of that star
The union of all colours are,
She sums all virtues that may be
In her sweet light of purity."

And in so far as other women approximate to this ideal are they worthy of honour, reverence, and love. Love must be spiritual in its nature. "On the wings of Christianity came the great truth that Love is of the soul, and with the soul coeval. It was most just and natural, therefore, that from the Christian poets should come the full development of its truth. To Dante and the followers of Dante we must go for its ripe pronouncement." Perhaps few poets have more completely broken away from what has been aptly termed the "fleshly school of love-poetry" than has Francis Thompson himself. True, poet-like, he is keenly sensitive to the charms of physical beauty, but he never forgets that the beautiful body is but the casket containing that priceless gem the

soul. Listen to his tiny poem, *Domus Tua* :

“ A perfect woman—Thine be laud !
Her body is a temple of God.
At Doom-bar dare I make avows :
I have loved the beauty of Thy house.”

And in *Manus Animam Pinxit* :

“ Oh, therefore, you who are
What words, being to such mysteries
As raiment to the body is,
Should rather hide than tell;
Chaste and intelligential love :
Whose form is as a grove
Hushed with the cooing of an unseen dove ;
Whose spirit to my touch thrills purer far
Than is the tingling of a silver bell ;
Whose body other ladies well might bear
As soul,—yea, which it profanation were
For all but you to take as fleshly woof,
Being spirit truest proof ;
Whose spirit sure is lineal to that
Which sang Magnificat.
Chastest, since such you are,
Take this curbed spirit of mine,
Which your own eyes invest with love
divine.”

“ Exaggeration,” you will say; “ Quixotism !”
It may be so, but is there a woman living in
the world who would not wish to deserve
to be thus sung of ?

Listen again :

“ How should I gauge what beauty is her
dole,
Who cannot see her countenance for her
soul,
As birds see not the casement for the sky ?
And, as 'tis check they prove its presence by,
I know not of her body till I find
My flight debarred the heaven of her mind.”

Her Portrait.

The eternal mother in the heart of a woman,
and the eternal child in the heart of a man,
are beautifully voiced in the lines :

“ Ah, foolish pools and meads ! You did
not see
Essence of old, essential pure as she :
For this was even that lady, and none other,
The man in me calls ‘ Love,’ the child calls
Mother.’ ”

In Her Paths.

Elsewhere he writes: "The function of natural love is to create a craving which it cannot satisfy. And then only has its water been tasted in perfect purity if it awakens an insatiate thirst for wine." Love has its infinite longings, and finite hearts yearn; hence, love is at once a joy and a pain. Absence of the loved one, lack of response either from a sense of duty, and of loyalty to others, or from sheer poverty of heart and soul, bring to the lover a sense of insufficiency or of desolation. *Love's Almsman* thus "plaineth his fare":

"But little food Love's beggars needs must
serve,
That eye your plenteous graces from the
street.
A handclasp I must feed on for a night,
A noon, although the untasted feast you lay,
To mock me, of your beauty. That you
might
Be lover for one space, and make essay
What 'tis to pass unsuppered to your couch,
Keep fast from love all day; and so be
taught

The famine which these craving lines
avouch !

Ah ! miser of good things that cost thee
naught,

How know'st thou poor men's hunger ?—

Misery,

When I go doleless and unfed by thee.”

A lighter note is struck in *Scala Jacobi*,
where he laments the absence of his beloved :

“ Now she is drawn up from me ;
All my angels, wet-eyed, tristful,
Gaze from great
Heaven's gate
Like pent children, very wistful,
That below a playmate see.”

There is the same “ sweet sorrow ” in
A Carrier Song :

“ Whereso your angel is
My angel goeth ;
I am left guardianless,
Paradise knoweth !
I have no heaven left
To weep my wrongs to ;
Heaven, when you went from us,
Went from my songs too.”

But this sorrow, which is three parts joy,
gives place to something far more poignant
in its suggestiveness in the poem entitled
Absence :

“ To him that waiteth, all things !
Even death, if thou wait !
And they that part too early
May meet again too late,—
Ah, fate !
If meeting be too late !”

And the tragic note is sounded in *A Holocaust*:

“ If my soul cries the uncomprehended cry
When the red agony oozed on Olivet.
Yet not for this, a caitiff, falter I,
Beloved, whom I must lose, nor thence
regret
The doubly-vouched and twin allegiance
owed
To you in Heaven, and Heaven in you,
Lady.
How could you hope, loose dealer with my
God,
That I should keep for you my fealty ?
For still 'tis thus:—because I am so true,
My Fair, to heaven, I am so true to you.”

Here we have a thought almost exactly parallel with that expressed in Christina Rossetti's sonnet:

"Trust me, I have not earned your dear rebuke."

In speaking of a friend who failed to understand his dramatic sequence, *A Narrow Vessel*, he once wrote: "He could not understand that all human love was to me a symbol of the divine love; nay, that human love was in my eyes a piteous failure unless as an image of the Supreme Love which gave meaning and reality to its seeming insanity." How perfectly love of the Creator and of the creature are united in the heart of a true lover he tells us in *My Lady, the Tyranness*:

"I have my heaven,
For which no arm of hers has striven;
Which solitary I must choose,
'And solitary win or lose.
Ah, but not heaven my own endures!
I must perforce

Taste you, my stream, in God your source,—
So steep my heaven in yours.”

In *Ultimum* he soars yet higher :

“ Love is dead !

I slew, that moan for him : he lifted me
Above myself, and that I might not be
Less than myself, need was that he should
die ;

Since Love, that first did wing, now clogged
me from the sky.

* * * * *

“ And, Lady, thus I dare to say

Not all with you is passed away !

Beyond your star, still, still the stars are
bright ;

Beyond your highness, still I follow height ;

Sole I go forth, yet still to my sad view,

Beyond your trueness, Lady, Truth stands
true.”

In *Paganism Old and New* he teaches the
selfsame lesson : “ Poor, indeed, if this were
all the promise which love unfolded to us—
the encountering light of two flames from
within their close-shut lanterns. Therefore
sings Dante, and sing all noble poets after

him, that Love in this world is a pilgrim and a wanderer, journeying to the New Jerusalem; not here is the consummation of his yearnings, in that mere knocking at the gate of union which we christen marriage, but beyond the pillars of death and the corridors of the grave, in the union of spirit to spirit within the containing spirit of God."

Not less attractive to Francis Thompson than the purity of woman was the innocence of children. Yet he is not the children's poet. Unlike Stevenson, he does not stoop to their level, except, perhaps, in the delightful poem *Ex Ore Infantium*, where, with all the tenderness of Blake and the familiar reverence of Coventry Patmore, he voices for us the child's apprehension of the awful truth of those mysterious words, "Et Verbum Caro factum est, et habitavit in nobis":

" Little Jesus, wast Thou shy
Once, and just so small as I?
And what did it feel like to be
Out of heaven, and just like me?

* * * * *

“ Hadst Thou ever any toys,
Like us little girls and boys ?
And didst Thou play in heaven with all
The Angels that were not too tall,
With stars for marbles ? Did the things
Play ‘ Can you see me ? ’ through their
wings ?

“ And did Thy Mother at the night
Kiss Thee, and fold the clothes in right ?
And didst Thou feel quite good in bed,
Kissed, and sweet, and Thy prayers said ? ”

We leave to those whose privilege it is to turn a child's early thoughts to high and holy things to decide whether this is as true to child-nature as it is to the best traditions of poetry.

In *The Making of Viola Thompson* describes the making of a little child in heaven, and by a most beautiful conceit conveys to us an idea of the dignity, the grandeur, the pricelessness of the child's soul and body. Here he seems to show his direct descent from Crashaw. There is the same luxuriant

imagery, the same sweet tenderness transfigured by the same high faith.

In speaking of Francis Thompson's poems on children we naturally revert to those of Blake and Wordsworth. Blake makes himself a child with children; hence his songs are characterised by utter simplicity and sincerity, whether he voice the child's joy or its sorrow. Wordsworth, with all the knowledge and understanding of Blake, sees in the child's simplicity and purity a reflex of the simplicity and purity of the Most High, hence his attitude towards the child is marked by a profound reverence and wonder expressed in terms of measured restraint. In Thompson's poems we have the tenderness and familiarity of Blake and the reverent wonder of Wordsworth, but we have more. The love of a child, which to many world-worn souls brings balm and healing and comfort, was to the poor self-tortured spirit of Thompson a fresh source of pain. Their innocent prattle, their caprice, their waywardness, even their very love-tokens, transform themselves into thorns which torment his sad

heart. That he is strongly attracted by them is abundantly evident:

“ For if in Eden as on earth are we,
I sure shall keep a younger company.”

And his epitaph, “ Look for me in the nurseries of heaven,” has already become almost a household phrase. Yet, though he so loved children and was so loved by them, one asks if he were ever a child with them.

He tells us in *The Poppy* how—

“ A child and man paced side by side,
Treading the skirts of eventide;
But between the clasp of his hand and hers
Lay, felt not, twenty withered years.

“ She turned with the rout of her dusk South
hair,
And saw the sleeping gipsy there;
And snatched and snapped it in swift
child’s whim,
With—‘ Keep it long as you live !’ to
him.

“ And his smile, as nymphs from their laving
 meres,
Trembled up from a bath of tears;
And joy, like a mew sea-rocked apart,
Tossed on the wave of his troubled heart.

“ For *he* saw what she did not see,
That—as kindled by its own fervency—
The verge shrivelled inward smoulder-
 ingly:
And suddenly 'twixt his hand and hers
He knew the twenty withered years—
No flower, but twenty shrivelled years.”

The love-token becomes “ the withered flower of dreams,” a silent witness of the wasted years; the subjective mind falls back upon itself, hiding the golden gleam of love behind the dark cloud of morbid self-condemnation, of self-pity.

“ The sleep flower sways in the wheat its
 head,
Heavy with dreams, as that with bread:
The goodly grain and the sun-flushed
 sleeper
The reaper reaps, and Time the reaper.

“ I hang ’mid men my needless head,
And my fruit is dreams, as theirs is
bread:

The goodly men, and the sun-hazed sleeper
Time shall reap, but after the reaper
The world shall glean of me—me, the
sleeper.

“ Love ! I fall into the claws of Time;
But lasts within a leavèd rhyme
All that the world of me esteems—
My withered dreams, my withered
dreams.”

And the poem ends with a cry of anguish
from a heart overweighted with a sense
of wasted powers and wasted years.

In *Daisy* he sings of her who gave him

“ A look, a word of her winsome mouth,
And a wild raspberry.”

Once more for a short space the sun
shines out:

“ A berry red, a guileless look,
A still word,—strings of sand !
And yet they made my wild, wild heart
Fly down to her little hand.”

But once more, too, the dark cloud lowers:

“ The fairest things have fleetest end,
Their scent survives their close:
But the rose's scent is bitterness
To him that loved the rose.

“ She looked a little wistfully,
Then went her sunshine way:—
The sea's eye had a mist on it,
And the leaves fell from the day.

“ She went her unremembering way,
She went and left in me
The pang of all the partings gone,
And partings yet to be.”

In *Sister Songs* he celebrates the charms of Monica and Sylvia, whose “ young sex is yet but in their soul.” There are wonderful thoughts in these poems—thoughts of faith, of hope, and of love; but here, too, the inevitable sadness resulting from a vivid realisation of the mutability of youth, as of all created things, is expressed in the unfading lines:

“ Now pass your ways, fair bird, and pass
your ways,
If you will;
I have you through the days !
And flit or hold you still,
And perch you where you list
On what wrist,—
You are mine through the times !
I have caught you fast forever in a tangle
of sweet rhymes.
And in your young maiden morn
You may scorn,
But you must be
Bound and sociate to me;
With this thread from out the tomb my
dead hand shall tether thee !”

Though these poems on childhood possess undoubted charm, yet one may well question whether they take high rank, even among Thompson's own works. The subjective note, so persistent in them all, informs them with a pathos fascinating and artistic it may be, but at the same time fatally morbid. The poet himself looms largely in them all; he is studying his own moods, and sad moods they are. Lest this judgment sound harsh,

let his own words endorse it. In his essay on Shelley he writes: "We of this self-conscious incredulous generation sentimentalise our children, analyse our children, think we are endowed with a special capacity to sympathise and identify ourselves with children; we play at being children. And the result is that *we* are not more childlike, but our *children* are less childlike. It is so tiring to stoop to the child, so much easier to lift the child up to you." And Francis Thompson, I think, in his poems on childhood more often chooses the line of least resistance.

Entirely different from that of Wordsworth or Shelley was Thompson's conception of Nature. Neither Pantheist nor Pagan, he held that God is the source of all thought and reality, not as the universal Being, nor as the formal constituent principle of things, but as their efficient cause, operating in and through each, and as the final cause for which they exist. In the essay entitled *Nature's Immortality*, he makes the following definite and quaintly humorous pronouncement:

“ To commune with the heart of Nature—this has been the accredited mode since the days of Wordsworth. Nature, Coleridge assures us, has ministrations by which she heals her erring and distempered child; and it is notorious how effectual were her ministrations in the case of Coleridge.”

“ Well, she is a very lovely Nature in this Sicily of mine, yet I confess a heinous doubt whether rustic stolidity may not be a secret effluence from her. You speak and you think she answers you. It is the echo of your own voice. You think you hear the throbbing of her heart, and it is the throbbing of your own. I do not believe that Nature has a heart; and I suspect that, like many another beauty, she has been credited with a heart because of her face. You go to her, this great, beautiful, tranquil, self-satisfied Nature, and you look for sympathy ! Yes, the sympathy of a cat, sitting by the fire and blinking at you. What, indeed, does she want with a heart or brain ? She knows that she is beautiful, and she is placidly content with the knowledge; she was made to be gazed on, and she

fulfils the end of her creation. After a careful anatomisation of Nature, I pronounce that she has nothing more than a lymphatic vesicle. She cannot give what she does not need; and, if we were but similarly organised, we should be independent of sympathy. A man cannot go straight to his objects, because he has a heart; he cannot eat, drink, sleep, make money, and be satisfied, because he has a heart. It is a mischievous thing, and wise men accordingly take the earliest opportunity of giving it away.

“ Yet the thing, after all, is too deep for a jest. What is this heart of Nature, if it exists at all? Is it, according to the conventional doctrine derived from Wordsworth and Shelley, a heart of love, according with the heart of man, and stealing out to him through a thousand avenues of mute sympathy? No; in this sense I repeat seriously what I said lightly, Nature has no heart. . . . O Titan Nature! a petty race which has dwarfed its spirit in dwellings, and bounded it in selfish shallows of art, may find you too vast, may shrink from you into its earths;

but though you be a very large thing, and my heart a very little thing, yet, Titan as you are, my heart is too great for you. Coleridge—speaking not as Wordsworth had taught him to speak, but from his own bitter experience—said the truth:

“ ‘ O Lady ! we receive but what we give,
And in our life alone does Nature live;
Ours is her wedding garment, ours her
shroud !

“ ‘ I may not hope from outward forms to win
The passion and the life whose fountains
are within.’

“ The truth, in relation to ourselves, though not the truth with regard to Nature absolutely. Absolute Nature lives not in our life, nor yet is lifeless, but lives in the life of God; and in so far, and so far merely, as man himself lives in that life, does he come into sympathy with Nature and Nature with him. She is God’s daughter, who stretches her hand only to her Father’s friends. Not Shelley, not Wordsworth himself, ever drew so close

to the heart of Nature as did the Seraph of Assisi who was close to the heart of God."

Later on in the same essay he says: "One thing prevents 'Adonais' from being ideally perfect—its lack of Christian hope. Yet we remember well the writer of a popular memoir on Keats proposing as 'the best consolation for the mind pained by this sad record' Shelley's inexpressibly sad exposition of Pantheistic immortality:

" 'He is a portion of that loveliness
Which once he made more lovely.'

What utter desolation can it be that discerns comfort in this hope whose wan countenance is the countenance of a despair? . . . What deepest depth of agony is it that finds consolation in *this* immortality—an immortality which thrusts you into the maw of Nature, that your dissolved elements may circulate through her? . . . Why, through the thin partition of this consolation Pantheism can hear the groans of its neighbour—Pessimism." Yet, later, he justly remarks: "Pantheism is a half-way house, and marks

ascent or descent according to the direction from which it is approached. Now Shelley came to it from absolute Atheism; therefore, in his case it meant rise."

I have quoted thus lengthily because the poet's own *Credo* concerning Nature is better than its exposition by another. In the poem *Nature: Laud and Complaint* we have the same ideas conveyed in almost identical words.

Prompted, perhaps, by the liturgical antiphon, *O Oriens*, he sees in the sun a type of Christ giving life to the Earth:

" Lo, of thy Magians I, the least,
Haste with my gold, my incenses and
myrrhs,
To thy desired epiphany, from the spiced
Regions and odorous of Song's traded East.
Thou, for the life of all that live,
The victim daily born and sacrificed;
To whom the pinion of this longing verse
Beats but with fire which first thyself did
give,
To thee, O Sun—or is't, perchance, to
Christ?"

Orient Ode.

In his *Ode to the Setting Sun*, he sees it standing out against the dark background of the horizon as the body of Christ hanging upon the dark wood of the Cross:

“ Like Him thou hang’st in dreadful pomp
of blood
Upon thy western rood;
And His stained brow did vail like thine
to-night,
Yet lift once more Its light.
And, risen, again_ departed from our
ball,
But when It set on earth arose in
heaven.”

As the human lover who views and measures all things in relation to his beloved, so does the poet see all things in relation to the great Lover of Souls.

In *New Year’s Chimes* he sings:

“ What is the song the stars sing?
(*And a million songs are as song of one.*)
This is the song the stars sing:
(*Sweeter song’s none.*)

* * * * *

“ The world above in the world below,
(*And a million worlds are but as one*)
And the One in all; as the sun’s strength so
Strives in all strength, glows in all glow
Of the earth that wits not, and man
thereon.

“ Braced in its own fourfold embrace
(*And a million strengths are as strength of
one*),
And round it all God’s arms of grace,
The world, so as the Vision says,
Doth with great lightning-tramples run.”

He describes how a simple *Field Flower*
springs from the hand of God:

“ God took a fit of Paradise-wind,
A slip of cœrule weather,
A thought as simple as Himself,
And ravelled them together.
Unto His eyes He held it there,
To teach it gazing debonair
With memory of what, perdie,
A God’s young innocences were.
His fingers pushed it through the sod—
It came up redolent of God,
Garrulous of the eyes of God
To all the breezes near it;

Musical of the mouth of God
To all had ears to hear it;
Mystical with the mirth of God
That glow-like did ensphere it."

A Snowflake tells us:

" God was my shaper.
 Passing surmised,
He hammered, He wrought me,
 From curled silver vapour
 To lust of His mind:—
Thou couldst not have thought me!
 So purely, so palely,
 Tinily, surely,
 Mightily, frailly.
Insculped and embossed
With His hammer of wind,
And His graver of frost."

I have already alluded to the knowledge which he gained in his years at Ushaw of the stately ritual of the Catholic Church. "Ritual" he defined as "poetry addressed to the eye." That he turned his knowledge to good account is everywhere evident, but

never in more telling imagery than in *The Orient Ode* :

“ Lo, in the sanctuaried East,
Day, a dedicated priest,
In all his robes pontifical exprest,
Lifteth slowly, lifteth sweetly,
From out its Orient tabernacle drawn,
Yon orbèd sacrament confest,
Which sprinkles benediction through the
dawn;
And when the grave procession's ceased,
The earth with due illustrious rite
Blessed,—ere the frail fingers featly
Of twilight, violet-cassocked acolyte,
His sacerdotal stoles invest—
Sets, for high close of the mysterious
feast,
The sun in august exposition meetly
Within the flaming monstrance of the
West.”

How wonderfully this man's thoughts play round the light that streams from the Sacrament of the Altar! “ *Pleni sunt cœli et terra gloria tua!*” sing earth, and sea, and sky; and man, too, sings, “ *Hosanna in excelsis!*”

The reader of Francis Thompson cannot but be impressed by the undertone of plaintive sadness which characterises nearly all his poems. Now, it is the gentle melancholy—leucocholy, as Gray calls it—native to the sensitive temperament of the artist—

“ She left me marvelling why my soul
Was sad that she was glad;
At all the sadness in the sweet,
The sweetness in the sad.”

Or it is a sadness induced by the pain of poetic travail, as in *Urania*, where he complains:

“ Lo, I, Song’s most true lover, plain me
sore
That worse than other women she can
deceive,
For she being goddess, I have given her
more
Than mortal ladies from their loves receive.

* * * * *

“ Now of her cozening I complain me sore,
 Seeing her uses,
That still, more constantly she is pursued,
 And straitlier wooed,
Her only-adorèd favour more refuses,
 And leaves me to implore
Remembered boon in bitterness of blood.”

Again, it is the pain of loneliness, the special trial of all who are stamped with the hall-mark of genius; and, indeed, though in less measure, the trial of every human being; thus he describes the soul:

“ The hold that falls not when the town is got,
The heart's heart, whose immurèd plot
Hath keys yourself keep not !

“ Its gates are deaf to Love, high summoner;
Yea, Love's great warrant runs not there:
You are your prisoner.

“ Yourself are with yourself the sole consortress
In that unleaguerable fortress;
It knows you not for portress.

“ Its keys are at the cincture hung of God ;
Its gates are trepidant to His nod ;
By Him its floors are trod.”

A Fallen Yew.

Or it is the very loneliness of pain, as in the
After-Strain of The Ode to the Setting Sun:

“ Even so, O Cross ! thine is the victory.
Thy roots are fast within our fairest fields ;
Brightness may emanate in Heaven from
thee,
Here thy dread symbol only shadow yields.

“ Of reapèd joys thou art the heavy sheaf
Which must be lifted, though the reaper
groan ;
Yea, we may cry till Heaven’s great ear be
deaf,
But we must bear thee, and must bear
alone.”

In *Retrospect* he cries :

“ Alas ! and I have sung
Much song of matters vain,
And a heaven-sweetened tongue
Turned to unprofiting strain.

* * * * *

“ What profit if the sun
Put forth his radiant thews,
And on his circuit run,
Even after my device, to this and to that
use;
And the true Orient, Christ,
Make not His cloud of thee ?
I have sung vanity
And nothing well devised.”

The same note of remorse for wasted opportunities is struck in the last lines of the sonnet *House of Bondage* :

“ I scorn myself, that put for such strange
toys
The wit of man to purposes of boys.”

There are times when Francis Thompson seems overweighted with the sense of pain and suffering. Pain is, in spite of the Christian Scientist :

“ Nothing begins and nothing ends
That is not paid with moan;
For we are born in other's pain,
And perish in our own.”

Pain is *inevitable*; it is the condition of all growth, of all life, whether physical, intellectual, or moral:

“Thou pacesst either frontier where our life
Marches with God’s; both birth and death
are given
Into thy lordship; those debated lands
Are subject to thy hands:
The border-warden, thou, of heaven.”

Laus Amara Doloris.

The same idea:

“That from spear and thorn alone
May be grown
For the front of saint or singer any divinizing
twine,”

is the central theme of that wonderful poem
The Mistress of Vision.

But comes the world-old question, “Why should this be so?” Try as we may, we cannot explain it; for pain is a mystery transcending all mere human reasoning. Yet, as Pascal reminds us, “the heart has its own reasons that reason does not compre-

hend," and mind and heart both tell us that had there been a higher or a nobler way of suffering, He Who was "a Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief" would have pointed it out to us, nay, would Himself have trod it. To our earth-bound vision pain and suffering may seem hard, especially when those who suffer are the innocent; but when our limited ideas of justice are one day expanded into the Divine standard,

" Deep set within the deep delight
Will be to know why all was right."

And it is no merely passive acquiescence in pain which Francis Thompson teaches. The Christian soul, looking upon the suffering Christ, desires to suffer with Him. Christ alone can adequately atone for sin, but the soul desires, from a two-fold spirit of reparation and love, to add her own expiations to His. For His sake, then, she is not only willing to suffer, but she seeks to suffer; she is not only willing to accept the cross, but she embraces it.

In *The Mistress of Vision* he asks:

“ On Golgotha there grew a thorn
Round the long pre-figured Brows.
Mourn, O mourn !
For the vine have we the spine ? Is this
all the heaven allows ? ”

And swiftly comes the answer:

“ On Calvary was shook a spear;
Press the point into thy heart—
Joy and fear !
All the spines upon the thorn into curling
tendrils start. ”

It has been wisely said that it is not what we take up, but what we give up that makes life truly worth living, and this lesson of renunciation finds its place, too, in the same poem:

“ With thee take
Only what none else would keep;
Learn to dream when thou dost wake,
Learn to wake when thou dost sleep,
Learn to water joy with tears,
Learn from fears to vanquish fears;

To hope, for thou dar'st not despair,
Exult, for that thou dar'st not grieve;
Plough thou the rock until it bear;
Know, for thou else couldst not believe;
Lose, that the lost thou may'st receive;
Die, for none other way canst live.
When earth and heaven lay down their
 veil,
And that apocalypse turns thee pale;
When thy seeing blindeth thee
To what thy fellow-mortals see;
When their sight to thee is sightless;
Their living, death; their light, most
 lightless,
Search no more—
Pass the gates of Luthany, tread the region
 Elenore."

A hard saying! It may be; and yet, in the tragic years of the Great War, how many brave young souls at the call of duty generously accepted it, and made the supreme sacrifice!

In the light of present-day events, and in the stress of a common sorrow, it is both interesting and salutary to remember the warnings which Francis Thompson gave to the

England of his own day. Of the nineteenth century he wrote:

“ This is she
That rose 'midst dust of a down-tumbled
world,
And dies with rumour on the air
Of preparation
For a more ample devastation,
And death of ancient fairness no more fair.

* * * * *

“ Let it grieve, grey Dame,
Thy passing spirit, God wot,
Thou wast half-hearted, wishing peace,
but not
The means of it. The avaricious flame
Thou'st fanned, which thou shouldst tame.”

The Nineteenth Century.

There is the same note of warning and rebuke in the poem *Peace*, written in 1902, on the occasion of the South African treaty. Reminding England that she, for whom so many children greatly bleed, stands doubly pledged to greatness, he continues:

“ But wilt thou, England, stand
With vigilant heart and prescient brain?—
Knowing there is no peace
Such as fools deem, of equal-balanced
ease:—

That they who build the State
Must, like the builders of Jerusalem,
The trowel in their hand,
Work with the sword laid ever nigh to
them.

If thou hold Honour worth gain
At price of gold and pain;
And all thy sail and cannon somewhat more
Than the fee'd watchers of the rich man's
store;

If thou discern the thing which all these
ward

Is that imperishable thing, a Name,
And that Name England; . . .

“ That in this Name's small girth
The treasure is thy sword and navies
guard, . . .

“ Wilt stay the war of all with all at odd,
And teach thy jarring sons
True innate once,—

That in the whole alone the part is blest
and great.

O should this fire of war thus purge away
The inveterate stains of too-long ease,
And yield us back our Empire's clay
Into one shoreless State,
Compact and hardened for its uses; these
No futile sounds of joyance are to-day;—
Lord, unrebuked we may
Call this Thy peace!

“ And in this day be not
Wholly forgot
They that made possible, but shall not
see,
Our solemn jubilee.
Peace most to them who lie
Beneath unnative sky,
In whose still hearts is dipt
Our reconciling script:
Peace! but when shouts shall start the
housetop bird,
Let these, that speak not, be the loudest
heard.”

Prophetic in its utterance is the short poem
on Faith entitled *Lilium Regis*.

“ O Lily of the King ! low lies thy silver wing,
And long has been the hour of thine un-
queening;
And thy scent of Paradise on the night-wind
spills its sighs,
Nor any take the secrets of its meaning.
O Lily of the King ! I speak a heavy thing,
Oh, patience, most sorrowful of daughters !
Lo, the hour is at hand for the troubling
of the land,
And red shall be the breaking of the waters.

“ Sit fast upon thy stalk, when the blast
shall with thee talk,
With the mercies of the King for thine
awning;
And the just understand that thine hour
is at hand,
Thine hour at hand with power in the
dawning.
When the nations lie in blood, and their
kings a broken brood,
Look up, O most sorrowful of daughters !
Lift up thy head and hark what sounds are
in the dark,
For His feet are coming to thee on the
waters.

“ O Lily of the King ! I shall not see, that
sing,
I shall not see the hour of thy queening !
But my song shall see, and wake like a
flower that dawn-winds shake,
And sigh with joy the odours of its meaning.
O Lily of the King, remember then the
thing
That this dead mouth sang; and thy
daughters,
As they dance before His way, sing there
on the Day
What I sang when the Night was on the
waters.

Of him who defined Poetry as “ a criticism
of life ” Francis Thompson writes:

“ Then came somewhat apart
In a fastidious dream
Arnold, with a half-discontented calm
Binding up wounds, but pouring in no
balm.”

The Victorian Ode.

Poor criticism of life, indeed, thinks the
Catholic poet, and think countless others, if
it be a cold and comfortless negation; if it

deny all, and affirm nothing; if it pull down, and cannot rebuild. A poet's interpretation of life depends on his attitude towards God. He may turn from Him and vainly "conspire to mend this sorry scheme of things," or he may turn to Him, finding in Him the solution of all problems that vex his soul; but one thing is certain—the help, the healing, and the strength which Matthew Arnold claims as the special benefits to be derived from poetry depend entirely on the right orientation of the mind, the heart, and the soul of the poet.

To Francis Thompson, Christ, the true Orient, was the central figure of life; the unseen world an ever-present reality. He turns to God as a child turns to its earthly father and cries:

“ ‘ Why do you so clasp me,
And draw me to your knee ?
Forsooth, you do but chafe me,
I pray you let me be.
I will but be loved now and then
When it liketh me.’ ”

Then, he continues:

“ To the tender God I turn:—

‘ Pardon, Love most High,
For I think those arms were even Thine,
And that child even I.’ ”

Love and the Child.

And he realises to the full the true liberty
of the children of God:

“ Hardest servitude has he
That’s jailed in arrogant liberty,
And freedom, spacious and unflawed,
Who is walled about with God.”

In *Any Saint* he brings home to us at once
the littleness and greatness of the man whom
the King delights to honour:

“ Stoop, stoop; for thou dost fear
The nettle’s wrathful spear,
So slight
Art thou of might.

“ Rise; for heaven hath no frown
When thou to thee pluck’st down,
Strong clod !
The neck of God.”

Elsewhere he writes :

“ Short arm needs man to reach to heaven,
So ready is heaven to stoop to him.”

It was, indeed, this consciousness, not merely of the reality, but of the nearness of the unseen world, this intimate sense of the love and friendship of Christ and the Saints—a love and friendship of which earthly ties are but as shadows—that inspired all his work; that made bearable the dark days and nights of the two darkest years of his life.

“ But (when so sad thou canst not sadder)
Cry; and upon thy so sore loss
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder
Pitched betwixt heaven and Charing Cross.
Yea, in the night, my soul, my daughter,
Cry,—clinging Heaven by the hems;
And lo, Christ walking on the water,
Not of Gennesareth, but Thames.”

But if we would understand still better this poet's philosophy of life—he would have called it by another name—we shall

find it fully synthesised in his great poem, *The Hound of Heaven*. Not a point touched upon in his other works but finds in that noble ode, at least, an implicit reference. "Life is a paradox!" cries the philosopher, and in the language of paradox the Christian poet seeks to find its solution.

The Hound of Heaven is the story not only of Francis Thompson's spiritual wanderings, but of those of countless others faced and perplexed by the problems of modern life. The fast changing kaleidoscope of Time may already have readjusted many of the intricacies of the pattern which the poet traces for us, but the broad outlines are the same to-day as when he wrote—nay, as they will be whilst men are men.

The poem pictures for us in bold and daring metaphor the everlasting quest of the creature for happiness, and the everlasting quest of the Creator for the creature. The idea may have been suggested by a somewhat parallel poem by the great Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross, but in his work the relations are reversed—Divine Love is pur-

sued by the soul. St. John meditates on God's transcendence, whilst Thompson emphasises His immanence.

His theme may be summed up in the cry of the Psalmist, "Whither shall I go from Thy Spirit, and whither shall I fly from before Thy Face?"; or in the confession of the great penitent, St. Augustine, "The heart of man is restless till it finds its rest in Thee"; or in the wise words of the author of *The Imitation*, "Forsake all, and thou shalt find all."

The whole poem is a variant on the story of the Good Shepherd; it is yet one more presentation of the fact of God's mercy and love.

In the first great stanza there is an allusion to those intellectual movements in the later nineteenth century which, admirable in themselves, yet in many cases led man to over-estimate the power of mere human reason. He flies down the labyrinthine ways of his own mind, from the light of the true Sun, but only to lose himself in titanic glooms of chasmed fears, tor-

mented by varying moods of optimism and pessimism.

“ But, with unhurrying chase
And unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,”

the Divine Lover pursues him, crying reproachfully:

“ ‘ All things betray thee who betrayest
Me.’ ”

Finding no rest within, the self-sentenced outlaw seeks elsewhere the satisfaction for which he craves. He begs for shelter in human hearts, asking a love and friendship which, forgetful of God, involves a sacrifice of moral principle:

“ I tempted all His servitors, but to find
My own betrayal in their constancy,
In faith to Him their fickleness to me.”

Baffled, he wanders “ across the margent of the world,” “ troubles the gold gateways of the stars,” “ clings to the whistling mane of every wind ”; but “ Fear wist not to evade

as Love wist to pursue." Once more he hears the reproachful voice:

"Naught shelters thee who will not shelter
Me."

In the third stanza there is an allusion to the modern cult of the child, to the tendency—less pronounced now, perhaps, than when Thompson wrote—to consider the child merely as a source of amusement and pleasure; to forget its interests in seeking our own. Disappointed once more, the fugitive seeks comfort from Nature, but once more he bitterly confesses:

"In vain my tears were wet on Heaven's
grey cheek.

For, ah! we know not what each other says,
These things and I; in sound *I* speak—
Their sound is but their stir, they speak
by silences.

Nature, poor step-dame, cannot slake my
drouth."

In the fourth stanza, the soul looks back on the failure of its past ideals, on its wasted

opportunities, and its disillusions. In an agony of loneliness and despair it cries:

“ Ah, must—

Designer infinite !—

Ah, must Thou char the wood ere Thou
canst limn with it ?”

Nothing remains to the wanderer but bitter memories of a fruitless past and the oncoming terror of Death. Darkness surrounds him on all sides, but—

“ Now of that long pursuit

Comes on at hand the bruit;

That Voice is round me like a bursting
sea;

‘ And is thy earth so marred,

Shattered in shard on shard ?

Lo, all things fly thee, for thou fliest Me !

Strange, piteous, futile thing !

Wherefore should any set thee love apart ?

Seeing none but I make much of naught ’

(He said),

‘ And human love needs human meriting;

How hast thou merited—

Of all men’s clotted clay the dingiest clot ?

Alack, thou knowest not

How little worthy of any love thou art !
Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee,
Save Me, save only Me ?
All which I took from thee I did but take,
Not for thy harms,
But just that thou might'st seek it in
My arms.

All which thy child's mistake
Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at
home ;
Rise, clasp My hand, and come !

“ Halts by me that footfall :
Is my gloom, after all,
Shade of His hand outstretched cares-
singly ? ”

asks the wondering soul. And gently the
answer falls :

“ ‘ Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,
I am He Whom thou seekest !
Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest
Me. ’ ”

It is life's last lesson. The soul that
feared “ lest, having Him, it might have
naught beside,” realises that the heart of man

is restless till it finds its rest in God, for in Him alone can it find patience without limit, satisfaction without satiety, and love without change. *The Hound of Heaven* points to the royal road of the Cross, the path of complete renunciation, whereon walk the heroes of the spiritual life with faces steadfastly set towards Jerusalem.

But not alone to those who walk on the higher tablelands and breathe a rarer air does the poet speak. To the humble wayfarers who toil along the dusty lower roads with aching heart and faltering feet, with eyes now downcast, now straining upward to catch a glimpse of the mountains whence help cometh—to these also he bears a divine message. He does not bid them strive beyond their strength; he does not bid them abstain from the fruit of knowledge; he does not bid them break all natural ties; he does not bid them live their lives without the solace of human love; but he tells them that it were better to lose any one, or all, of these things than run the least risk of losing God. “Give God His rightful place in your life,”

he cries, "and, having Him, you shall have all besides."

The Hound of Heaven is the triumphant cry of a soul tried and purified in the fire of tribulation; a cry which goes straight to the hearts of many who find in it the expression of certain moods of their own soul, certain phases of their own spiritual life; a cry which reaches all

"That stand in the dark on the lowest stair,
While affirming of God, He is certainly
there."

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